



The resilience of a community of practice during the COVID-19 crisis

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During our two-week spring break this past March, Yale—like so many institutions—made the decision to pivot rapidly from in-person to fully remote instruction. Our students, many of whom were traveling across the world, were strongly advised not to return to campus. For the faculty, including our language instructors, this decision meant making a swift and radical transition to a mode of teaching that most of them were completely unfamiliar with. For our language center, it entailed going into emergency mode and creating a series of workshops and training sessions to familiarize the instructors with the basic technologies and teaching strategies required to offer their courses remotely. Despite the stressful and intense effort required to maintain some level of academic continuity, the majority of our instructors managed to find a way to make it to the end of the semester, using all the skills and resources at their disposal. However, now that the academic year is behind us, and we are moving beyond the crisis mode, our language teaching community is recognizing the need for deeper reflection and a radical reconceptualization of their pedagogical practices in order to anticipate a more sustained and ongoing change in the instructional environment in the coming year. In my brief comments below, I will reflect on how the COVID-19 crisis has forced us to not just react to the immediate challenges but also to reconsider who we are as a discipline, recognize our strengths and weaknesses, and prepare for long-term changes in our profession. Language centers are in a unique position to be a collaborative partner in this process because of their longstanding and deep engagement with language instructors, their extensive experience with pedagogy and technology, their central position within their institutions, and their collaborative connections with other institutions.

For language courses, the transition from in-person to remote classes was fundamentally different from that of many other disciplines and required a much greater degree of personal involvement by the instructors and a more targeted and discipline-specific approach to maintaining some degree of instructional quality. Whereas many faculty members in other disciplines simply moved to offering pre-recorded lectures followed by synchronous Zoom discussions, language instructors struggled to find ways to continue a high degree of interactivity in their classes, create opportunities for student engagement in a distributed learning environment, and prepare sufficient activities and materials for their daily classes. Maintaining strictly synchronous meeting times became an immediate challenge as it presented itself as one of the barriers for students who were now dispersed in different time zones across the globe. Because of their daily interactions with students, language instructors generally establish much closer personal connections with students than other faculty, and this became amplified under the current circumstances. Many of the language teachers became closely involved in the challenges—and in some cases even extraordinary hardships—that their students were facing and responded to their needs in a variety of ways (by offering one-on-one meetings, initiating individual phone conversations, grouping them by time zone, etc.). Meeting the challenges of this crisis thus became much more than mastering the technology but involved finding ways to support students pedagogically as well as emotionally and psychologically, and I believe

that our language center was able to play an important role in facilitating this process thanks to the close relationship that we had established with the language instructors.

Over the course of many years, our language center and the language teaching community have fostered a tight community of practice both at Yale and beyond our institution, which we were able to mobilize in this crisis to offer peer support and guidance. We strive to promote a collegial atmosphere of mutual respect and trust that supports a diversity of pedagogical perspectives, experiences, and needs through an ongoing, peer-facilitated exchange of ideas, not through a top-down approach. We had already put in place a peer network website in which our language faculty shared resources and materials, and this site became an immediate repository for useful resources on remote teaching strategies. We also uploaded all our recorded training sessions there so that instructors could view or review the workshops at any time. Within the broader group of language instructors, graduate students also played an active role in providing support for each other. Like other language centers, we offer specialized training for graduate students, and we have an established Second Language Acquisition (SLA) certificate program in place as well as a relatively new Distance Language Teaching certificate program. We are supported in these programs by two graduate teaching fellows who co-facilitate workshops and other events and offer various peer-supported activities. During the current crisis, our teaching fellows were invaluable in helping us reach out to and better connect with graduate students who were facing challenges that were in many ways quite different from those of other groups on campus. Beyond Yale, we also relied on colleagues from several institutions with which we have established close connections. Over the past ten years, we have collaborated with Columbia and Cornell in the Shared Course Initiative (SCI), in which we share less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) through class-to-class videoconferencing. As a result of this project, we have developed an array of technology-enhanced strategies and models for distance teaching, but—more importantly—we have created a tight network of experienced colleagues across institutional boundaries that we were able to connect to. At this critical moment, we discovered the additional benefits of this collaboration as we held a number of events in which we exchanged ideas and experiences with colleagues across several institutions.

To get a better sense of the issues and questions that had emerged over the course of the semester, we sent out a survey to our language instructors (including graduate teaching fellows) at the end of the spring term. We received a large response rate (approximately 75% of all language faculty participated), and the feedback produced a rich and detailed picture of our language instructors' teaching experiences in this new environment. The responses also guided us in our planning for the future. The instructors did not simply respond to our questions but offered extensive and thoughtful feedback which will help us better understand their needs; they wrote in-depth reflections on what had worked well and what challenges they had encountered; and they offered advice and suggestions for colleagues and students. Above all, most recognized that while they had been able to manage getting through the spring term more or less successfully, anticipating some form of remote instruction for the upcoming summer and academic year would require a much greater degree of preparation and planning. They realized that simply transitioning face-to-face (FTF) class activities to an online mode was not adequate and they were all in agreement that a radical reconceptualization of their curricula and syllabi would be essential. A broad consensus also emerged regarding the need for creating a better balance between synchronous and asynchronous activities that would allow them to take greater advantage of the different affordances of each mode.

As a result of the detailed feedback and suggestions we received in the survey, we developed several intensive, systematic training programs that we are implementing this summer to help faculty rethink their pedagogical strategies and select the appropriate tools to reach their curricular goals. We were able to revise the curriculum of our existing graduate distance training program to address the specific needs of the current crisis and create a scaffolded program based on sound pedagogical principles. So far, we have offered two 12-hour, six-session training programs that focus on promoting high-quality language instruction in a remote setting and include such topics as course design, student engagement and autonomy, creating synchronous and asynchronous activities, and adapting assessment strategies. One positive and unintended outcome of these trainings has been the opportunity for instructors to consider adopting new pedagogical strategies and assessments that can also benefit their FTF instruction. Several of our instructors went

through a process of critical re-evaluation of their teaching practices and made fundamental changes to their pedagogy, resulting in an emphasis on more student-centered and collaborative activities, including project-based learning, and adding more flexible, formative or low-stakes assessments, such as self-assessments and peer assessments. For the summer study abroad courses, which are being taught online, the instructors began to explore ways of engaging students in more meaningful cultural activities that could still allow them to connect with the target locations despite the obvious geographic separation. This entailed, for example, using more authentic resources, such as virtual museums, images, and mapping tools, or finding virtual ways to connect the students with speakers in a target community. Finally, our current, third iteration of our training program focuses specifically on the needs of the pre-modern languages. These sessions also provide an opportunity for faculty to begin rethinking the more traditional pedagogies that still tend to be prevalent among the non-spoken languages by, for example, adding more student-centered activities, collaborative strategies for reading, translating, and annotating texts, asynchronous activities, inductive grammar practice, and increased emphasis on group and pair work.

In total, over the past several months, our center has offered almost one hundred events, including extended training sessions, targeted workshops, peer-facilitated sharing sessions, drop-in hours, one-on-one support, and social events. Our informal weekly virtual social gatherings and Friday happy hours provided opportunities for instructors to share their concerns and reaffirm personal connections at a time when they were removed from their daily interactions with colleagues, and these gatherings were valued as much as, if not more so, than the professional development activities. Through all these events, we were able to reach all language faculty on our campus, a milestone we had not attained with our regular programs, and I have been struck by the deep level of engagement and sustained commitment of our language instructors at this difficult time. In the midst of all the tragic circumstances, the COVID-19 crisis has unexpectedly and somewhat surprisingly brought to the fore the role of teaching as central to our institutional missions, as even research institutions have been struggling to maintain academic continuity across the spectrum of disciplines. This may have contributed to an increased visibility of language study within the larger institutional context and appears to have made administrators more aware of the expertise and professionalism of the language teaching profession. Language teaching distinguishes itself from other disciplines in several significant ways: it is guided by a well-developed, research-based, and systematic methodology, and it is represented by a collaborative and cohesive community of practice that crosses departmental boundaries. While its highly interactive pedagogy posed a number of specific challenges, as I mentioned above, its instructional strategies and approaches also offer insights and solutions that are now becoming recognized as relevant for other disciplines as well. Over the past several months, in preparing for the uncertainties of the upcoming academic year, my institution has been engaging in a collaborative and bottom-up process of gathering input and collecting data from among a large cross-section of the tenure-track and instructional faculty on how to best address the many challenges and uncertainties that lie ahead. These committees and task forces have created detailed guidelines for the various disciplines regarding best practices for different ways of teaching, including seminars, large lecture courses, and language and writing courses. Language instructors were invited by the administration to participate in this process, and their voices added an important and nuanced dimension to the broader institutional conversations. From the perspective of small, daily classes, they pointed, for example, to issues such as the balance between synchronous and asynchronous activities, rethinking class sizes, the pros and cons of various pedagogical models, and addressing the needs of both graduate and undergraduate students. Many of these insights are helpful to other disciplines that had not paid much attention to teaching before.

For those of us working at a language center, these past few months have been both incredibly challenging as well as tremendously rewarding. Every single member of our staff has worked quite literally seven days a week to meet the demands for training and support among our language faculty and graduate students. What set our approach apart from other units devoted to teaching was our emphasis on discipline-specific pedagogy based on highly developed and well-researched pedagogical principles and providing custom-tailored rather than generic solutions. At this point, we do not yet have a clear sense of what the fall semester might look like and what decisions will be made regarding on-campus or remote instruction. We are

therefore continuing to prepare our instructors for some form of remote teaching and, in collaboration with the language departments, will also need to rethink our training for their graduate student teaching fellows who will face the double challenge of both being new to teaching and dealing with an online environment in an unpredictable situation. At the same time, we recognized the strengths that a large and cohesive community can bring to such a devastating crisis and the crucial role that a language center can play in bringing instructors together. While they may represent a difference of practices, perspectives, and opinions, our language instructors formed a united front that supported each other both pedagogically and emotionally and served as advocates for their colleagues on an institutional level. All of this has left me reasonably assured about our level of preparation for the upcoming academic year, but at the same time, I am also deeply concerned about some of the long-term consequences of this crisis that might pose a major threat to our profession. First, given the devastating budgetary impact of the COVID-19 crisis on many institutions, programmatic cuts are already being made and will undoubtedly increase over the next several years. Language programs, and particularly the less commonly taught languages, have been at risk for several years now because of the steep declines in enrollments as documented in the most recent MLA report (Looney & Lusin, 2019) and may face additional cutbacks in this current climate. Language instructors, often in contingent positions, are particularly vulnerable as programs are reduced or eliminated. Second, the rapid transition to remote teaching this past semester may have given online and distance teaching a stronger foothold in the institutional ecosystem. Even private or largely residential institutions that had thus far resisted the move toward online instruction may have become more aware of its potential benefits and more accepting of including some distance education components in their curricula. This should be monitored carefully to avoid going down a slippery slope. Languages in particular may run the risk of being outsourced to online, and possibly commercial, solutions, something that is already happening to some extent with language testing. A final concern is the job market. For graduate students in language departments, the job outlook has been bleak for a number of years, with continued overall declines in available positions, and the proportion of the contingent positions increasing as a share of the overall job market. In the coming years, I fear that current graduate students will face additional serious challenges as a result of the continued fallout from the COVID-19 crisis, and we should prepare them for this changed institutional landscape by, for example, offering more comprehensive pedagogical training that also should include distance teaching experience, and by providing them with a more realistic perspective on the broader language education landscape that looks beyond the academic realm. The crisis should be a wakeup call to our discipline about the real and systemic changes that we are facing.

I do not want to end these reflections on an entirely pessimistic note, however. The extraordinary circumstances of this past semester have also shown us the strength and resilience of our language teaching community. The extent and depth of their engagement was extraordinary and manifested itself on so many levels: in their true devotion to their students; their dedication to their teaching; and their active involvement in advocacy for each other and for our profession. Despite the very real and ongoing challenges and the uncertainties that lie ahead, our recent experiences have strengthened my commitment to the work that we do as a language center and has reaffirmed how much I value our partnership with our language instructors.

References

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